

# Arminianism as a Variant Within Calvinism: Arminius's Self-Identification and Shared Theological Framework

## Executive Summary

The popular conception of Calvinism and Arminianism as two entirely separate and opposing theological systems is historically and theologically misleading. Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) did not found a rival system of theology; he articulated a minority position *within* the Dutch Reformed tradition on a narrow set of soteriological questions, all while publicly identifying himself as a Reformed theologian, signing the Reformed confessions, celebrating the Reformation's *sola* principles, and commending John Calvin's writings to his own students. What became known as "Arminianism" after his death — particularly in its Wesleyan and later popular forms — diverged significantly from what Arminius himself taught. The argument that Arminianism is a distinct theology *apart from* Calvinism is difficult to sustain in light of Arminius's own testimony, his educational formation, his confessional commitments, and the narrow scope of his actual disagreements with the mainstream Reformed position.

## Arminius's Formation Within the Calvinist Tradition

Arminius was shaped intellectually by the same tradition he is claimed to have rejected. Born in 1560 in Oudewater in the Netherlands, he studied theology at the University of Leiden beginning in 1576, where his teachers included men working within the Reformed scholastic framework. In 1582 he traveled to Geneva — the epicenter of Calvinist thought — and enrolled at the Genevan Academy under Theodore Beza, Calvin's own successor. Beza's letter of recommendation upon Arminius's departure praised his intellectual rigor and expected him to bear "the richest fruits" in theological work. There is no evidence that Arminius departed from Reformed orthodoxy during his Geneva years; even his later mild Calvinism "was well represented in Geneva among other Dutch students and even in the faculty".<sup>[1][2][^3]</sup>

After Geneva, Arminius returned to serve as a Reformed pastor in Amsterdam for fifteen years, where he subscribed to the Belgic Confession as required by the Dutch church's synodal decisions. It was during these pastoral years that the controversy began — not from outside the Reformed tradition, but from within it. Arminius was explicitly *commissioned to defend Calvinism* against the anti-Calvinist views of Dirck Coornhert, a task that prompted him to question certain aspects of supralapsarian predestination while still working as a committed Reformed minister.<sup>[4][5][6][1]</sup>

## Arminius's Explicit Self-Identification as Reformed

Perhaps the most important evidence against treating Arminianism as a separate theology is Arminius's own self-declaration. Multiple historical sources confirm that he consistently and publicly identified himself as a Reformed theologian to the end of his life.

The Christian History Institute states plainly: "Arminius considered himself a Calvinist, but he was not comfortable with the strict Calvinist view of predestination". According to The Gospel Coalition, "The staunchly Protestant Arminius saw himself as Reformed to the day he died. He always remained true to, and in good standing with, the Reformed Church, subscribing and publicly committing himself to the Belgic Confession of Faith and Heidelberg Catechism over and over again". The Arminian academic journal *The Arminian* notes similarly: "Yet Arminius always regarded himself as a Reformed thinker".<sup>[7]</sup><sup>[8]</sup><sup>[9]</sup><sup>[4]</sup>

The Evangelical Arminians website confirms that Arminius regularly expressed agreement with the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and that "his theological frames of reference were Reformed theologians and Reformed confessions". In his *Declaration of Sentiments* (delivered October 30, 1608 — less than a year before his death), Arminius defended his views to the States of Holland, not as someone departing from Reformed Christianity, but as someone who believed his positions were *consistent* with the Reformed confessional standards.<sup>[10]</sup><sup>[11]</sup><sup>[^12]</sup>

## Arminius's Admiration for John Calvin

Arminius not only identified himself with the Reformed tradition broadly; he expressed specific admiration for Calvin himself — a fact that many on both sides of the debate overlook or suppress.

In a well-known passage, Arminius wrote of Calvin's biblical commentaries: "In the interpretation of the Scriptures, Calvin is incomparable. His Commentaries are more to be valued than anything that is handed down to us in the writings of the Fathers... I concede to him a certain spirit of prophecy in which he stands distinguished above others, above most, indeed, above all". This was no polite diplomatic concession — it was a substantive theological endorsement of Calvin's exegetical method and spiritual insight.<sup>[^9]</sup>

Arminius reportedly gave away Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to his theological students, making it his second favorite work to distribute after the Heidelberg Catechism. One source summarizes: "Arminius's favorite commentator was John Calvin". He also required his own students at the University of Leiden to read and study from the *Institutes*. This pattern of behavior is not that of a theologian who saw himself as founding an alternative system; it is the pattern of a Reformed insider who disagreed with one branch of interpretation within a shared framework.<sup>[13]</sup><sup>[14]</sup><sup>[^9]</sup>

## The Narrow Scope of Arminius's Actual Disagreements

A careful examination of what Arminius *actually taught* reveals that his disagreements with mainstream Calvinist theology were real but limited in scope. The major points of contention were:

- **Unconditional election:** Arminius argued that God's decree of election is based on divine foreknowledge of those who would believe, rather than being unconditional. His Declaration of Sentiments states: "This decree has its foundation in divine foreknowledge, through which God has known from all eternity those individuals who through the established means of his prevenient grace would come to faith".<sup>[12]</sup>
- **The nature and resistibility of grace:** Arminius maintained that saving grace, while absolutely necessary, could be resisted by the recipient.
- **The extent of the atonement:** He held that Christ's atoning work was universal in scope rather than particular to the elect only.<sup>[7]</sup>

Crucially, Arminius *agreed* with Calvin and the Reformed tradition on the vast majority of soteriological ground. Theologian J. Matthew Pinson summarizes this precisely: "He agreed with Calvin and his followers on *what it means to be* in a state of grace, but he differed from them on *how one comes to be* in a state of grace". In practical terms, "full-fledged Arminians are 'one-point Calvinists'" — meaning that of the five TULIP points formulated at Dort, Arminius himself strongly affirmed total depravity and only diverged on unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and (to a disputed degree) the perseverance of the saints.<sup>[15]</sup>

## The Five Reformation *Solas* in Arminius's Theology

One of the most powerful demonstrations that Arminius remained firmly within the Reformed tradition is his wholehearted embrace of the five *solas* — the hallmarks of Reformation theology — which are shared equally by Calvinists and, in Arminius's formulation, by Arminians.

### Sola Scriptura

Arminius agreed wholeheartedly with the Reformers on the inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture as the sole authority for Christian doctrine and practice. In his disputation "On the Sufficiency and Perfection of the Holy Scriptures," he explicitly stated that no subject necessary for the church's knowledge is absent from Holy Scripture.<sup>[9]</sup>

### Sola Gratia

Arminius's commitment to grace *alone* as the source of salvation is often underestimated or misrepresented. He explicitly wrote: "It is impossible for free will without grace to begin or perfect any true or spiritual good. I say, the grace of Christ, which pertains to regeneration, is simply and absolutely necessary for the illumination of the mind, the ordering of the affections, and the inclination of the will to that which is good". In his public disputations he declared the human will in its natural state to be "not only wounded, bruised, inferior, crooked, and attenuated; but it is likewise captivated, destroyed and lost; and has no powers

whatever, except such as are excited by grace". Moses Stuart, reviewing Arminius's language on depravity, remarked: "The most thorough advocate of total depravity will scarcely venture to go farther in regard to man in his unregenerate state than... Arminius goes".<sup>[16][17][^9]</sup>

Arminius even declared that Christians "must maintain the greatest possible distance from Pelagianism" — a direct repudiation of the most common charge leveled against him and his followers. The Arminius scholar Carl Bangs went so far as to assert: "Arminius was a monergist".<sup>[15][9]</sup>

## Sola Fide

Arminius affirmed the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith alone through the imputation of Christ's righteousness. In his own words: "My doctrine of justification is not so different from [Calvin's] as to prevent my signing my name to the positions he takes in Book III of his *Institutes*. To these opinions, I am prepared to state my full approval at any time". He further wrote in his *Declaration of Sentiments*: "I believe sinners are accounted righteous solely by the obedience of Christ... as if they had perfectly fulfilled the law". In his formal disputations, Arminius explicitly upheld *imputed* righteousness: "the formal righteousness... can on no account be called 'inherent;' but... may in an accommodated sense be denominated 'imputed'... as being the righteousness of another, that is, of Christ, which is made ours by God's gracious imputation".<sup>[18][19][^9]</sup>

## Solus Christus

Arminius zealously defended Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity, in line with Reformation teaching. His theology centered on the threefold mediatorial office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king, and he affirmed the full penal-substitutionary atonement of Christ as a necessary satisfaction of divine justice. He explicitly condemned Marian veneration and the invocation of saints as idolatry.<sup>[^9]</sup>

## Soli Deo Gloria

Arminius maintained that God alone deserves all glory in salvation. He taught that "the entire end or purpose of the church is the glory of God," and that God's "twofold love" — for his justice and for humanity — means that God's glory is maximized when both his mercy and his justice are fully displayed in the provision of salvation.<sup>[^9]</sup>

## Total Depravity: A Shared Augustinian Commitment

The most common misrepresentation of Arminius is that his theology denies or weakens the doctrine of total depravity, making him a semi-Pelagian. This charge, frequently repeated in Calvinist circles from Gomarus in the seventeenth century to J. I. Packer in the twentieth, is simply untrue of Arminius himself.<sup>[^15]</sup>

The Remonstrants' Five Articles of 1610, formulated by Arminius's followers after his death, explicitly state: "Man does not possess saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free will, inasmuch as in his state of apostasy and sin he can of and by himself neither think, will,

nor do anything that is truly good." The same articles continue: "The grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to the extent that the regenerate man himself, without prevenient or assisting, awakening, following and co-operative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good, nor withstand any temptations to evil". This is not the language of semi-Pelagianism; it is profoundly Augustinian language entirely consistent with classical Reformed theology on the nature of fallen humanity.<sup>[20]</sup><sup>[15]</sup>

Methodist systematic theologian Richard Watson affirmed: "The true Arminian, as fully as the Calvinist, admits the doctrine of the total depravity of human nature in consequence of the fall of our first parents". Even Reformed scholars Peterson and Williams, writing *against* Arminianism, acknowledged that Arminians are more accurately "Semi-Augustinians" rather than Semi-Pelagians.<sup>[^15]</sup>

## Arminianism as an Internal Reformed Dispute

The historical context of the Arminian controversy further supports the understanding of Arminianism as an internal Reformed dispute rather than a separate theological tradition. The Synod of Dort (1618–1619) was convened not as a confrontation between two separate religious bodies, but as an assembly *of the Dutch Reformed Church* to adjudicate a dispute among its own members. Delegates came from Reformed churches across Germany, Switzerland, and England to rule on a matter that was from start to finish a family quarrel within Reformed Protestantism.<sup>[21]</sup><sup>[22]</sup>

The debate precipitated by the Remonstrance of 1610 — submitted by forty-six Arminian ministers — was a narrowly focused objection to specific formulations of Calvinist predestinarianism, not a wholesale rejection of the Reformed theological system. As Pinson notes, Arminius "represented a strain of thinking in the Reformed churches prior to the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) that had always been broader than Calvinist predestinarianism" — a tradition that included pre-Dort Reformed theologians with impeccable Reformed credentials. The TULIP acrostic itself was not a pre-existing Calvinist formulation; it emerged *in response* to the Arminian Remonstrance. The Calvinists did not originate the five-point structure; rather, the Arminian Remonstrants identified five points of disagreement with mainstream Reformed teaching, and the Canons of Dort replied point by point.<sup>[23]</sup><sup>[24]</sup><sup>[^15]</sup>

## What "Arminianism" Later Became vs. What Arminius Taught

A critical distinction must be maintained between the theology of Arminius himself and the movement that bore his name after his death. The trajectory of "Arminianism" in subsequent centuries — through the Remonstrants, through John Wesley and Methodism, through Holiness theology, and into much of contemporary evangelical Christianity — diverged significantly from Arminius's own careful, Reformed-saturated formulations.<sup>[25]</sup><sup>[26]</sup>

Keith Stanglin, one of the foremost contemporary Arminius scholars, observes that "when one hears of 'Arminian' doctrines of grace, predestination, perfection, atonement, sin, free will, and human reason, these accounts often owe very little to Arminius himself". Post-Dortian Arminianism progressively moved away from Arminius's strong affirmations of total

depravity, imputed righteousness, and forensic justification, incorporating instead greater synergism, moralistic atonement theories, and in its Wesleyan form, doctrines of entire sanctification and Christian perfection entirely foreign to Arminius's thought.<sup>[26][27]</sup>

Pinson accordingly argues for the concept of "Reformed Arminianism" as a recovery of Arminius's actual theology: a position that holds Arminius's limited disagreements on predestination and resistible grace while retaining the full Reformed framework on sin, atonement, justification, and sanctification. This is, Pinson argues, the more historically honest Arminianism — and it differs dramatically from the popular conception of Arminianism as a semi-Pelagian free-will theology.<sup>[^27]</sup>

## The Scholarly Debate Over Arminius's Reformed Identity

Modern scholarship has reopened the question of whether Arminius stood within or outside the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy. Carl Bangs, Roger Olson, Keith Stanglin, and Thomas McCall have argued that Arminius was a genuinely Reformed theologian who was mistreated by his opponents and whose theology was distorted by polemical caricature. John Fesko's *Arminius and the Reformed Tradition* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2022) pushes back, arguing through careful historical comparison that Arminius's soteriology did depart from the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy as defined by the Reformed confessions and his contemporaries. Richard Muller and W. Robert Godfrey have offered similar critiques.<sup>[28][25]</sup>

The debate itself, however, confirms the thesis: the question is not whether Arminius founded a separate theological tradition, but *how far* his modifications extended within the Reformed tradition he explicitly claimed as his own. Even those who argue Arminius crossed the line do so by comparing his views *to other Reformed theologians and Reformed confessions* — not by placing him outside the Reformed conversation entirely. The very terms of the debate acknowledge that Arminius was operating within the Reformed theological universe.

## Conclusion

Arminianism, properly understood as the theology of Jacobus Arminius, is best characterized as a minority variant within the broader Calvinist and Reformed tradition — not a distinct theological system standing apart from it. The evidence is substantial and multi-dimensional:

- **Self-identification:** Arminius consistently called himself a Reformed theologian and remained in good standing with the Reformed Church to his death.<sup>[4][7][^9]</sup>
- **Confessional commitment:** He repeatedly subscribed to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, the doctrinal standards of the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>[29][6][^9]</sup>
- **Admiration for Calvin:** He praised Calvin's commentaries above the Church Fathers, recommended the *Institutes* to his students, and affirmed Calvin's doctrine of justification.<sup>[14][9]</sup>
- **The five *solas*:** He affirmed *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, *Solus Christus*, and *Soli Deo Gloria* — the constitutive markers of the Reformation tradition.<sup>[^9]</sup>

- **Total depravity:** He taught a robust doctrine of human inability and total depravity indistinguishable in substance from the Augustinian-Calvinist tradition, explicitly repudiating Pelagianism.<sup>[17][16][^15]</sup>
- **Narrow disagreements:** His departures from mainstream Calvinist doctrine were confined to the mechanism of election, the resistibility of grace, and the extent of the atonement — not the fundamental structure of Reformed soteriology.<sup>[30][15]</sup>

The Synod of Dort was a dispute within Reformed Christianity, not a confrontation between two competing religious traditions. What Arminius proposed was not a new theology but a reformed Calvinism — a modification of the supralapsarian predestinarianism he found in Beza, not a rejection of the Calvinist theological framework. The theology that popularly bears his name today, having absorbed Wesleyan, Holiness, and synergistic elements, may well constitute something qualitatively distinct from Calvinism — but that is a later development that Arminius himself would likely not have recognized or endorsed.

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